

# Guru Nanak and The Civil Servant

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**G**URU Nanak, (1469-1539) whose Quincentenary Birthday Celebrations have been celebrated throughout the world about two years ago, was, by profession, a civil servant before he was called upon to don the mantle of a Prophet and commissioned by God to preach a new religion of "Praise of God, and the Name of God". The only other profession, which he adopted in his latter life, when he settled down at Kartarpur (Ravi), was that of a farmer, but by that time, he had become some kind of 'a universal man', and it is, therefore, secular profession of a civil servant which he undertook as Nanak, an individual and a private citizen. Thus, anything he has said directly or indirectly about the calling and duties of a Civil Servant assumes a particularly poignant relevance for the distinguished gathering of the Cadre of high class Civil Services whom I have the privilege to address today.

2. As the *Janamsakhis* tell us, when the father of Nanak failed in engaging the attention of his son in a worldly profession, the husband of the elder sister of Nanak, who was already in the employment of the Lodhi Prince, Daulat Khan at the principality of Sultanpur in the Punjab, secured an appointment for Nanak as the Chief Government Storekeeper. Nanak worked as a Civil Servant for a number of years when formal accusa-

tions were made against him of having misappropriated government stores and of falsification of public records relating to the accounts of the government stores. He was, what would now be called 'suspended' from the Service and an inquiry was ordered against him. As it happened, he was found missing from his post of duty and residence and was believed to have drowned himself in the river, called, Bein, that flows by Sultanpur. Vigorous searches were made for the recovery of his body when, after full three days of absence, Nanak emerged out of the waters of the river safe and sound, and made his first proclamation as a Prophet by uttering: "There is no Hindu, there is no Musalman".

3. *Janamsakhis* inform us that Nanak refused to be present at the formal inquiry of checking up and verification of the government stores and the account books and, instead, took his abode in the graveyard of the town. He refused to appear before the Prince even after the inquiry had revealed complete falsity of the charges levelled against him and he resigned from the service with immediate effect.

4. The chronicles of his life further say that, on this occasion, he entered into what the Yoga texts describe as a *jalstambhā-samadhi* i.e. a trance under waters, in which state he remained for three days before emerging out

of the river. During this trance Nanak received his first revelation and his first commission to found a new Religion and preach a new Way of Life. Revelation is not a psychological process in the individual's mind; it is an encounter with Reality and the individual does not make a spiritual discovery through his own mental cogitation, but he encounters God and this distinction is fundamental. Henceforth, Nanak becomes Guru Nanak, the World Teacher. This encounter is described in the *Janamsakhi* in the following words:

"As God willed Nanak, His devotee was escorted to His Presence and then a cup filled with the Liquid of Immortality was given to him with the command, "Nanak, pay attention, this is the cup of holy adoration of My Name. Drink it..I am with thee and thee do I bless and exalt..Go, rejoice in My Name, the Name of God and preach to others to do the same....let this be thy calling."<sup>1</sup>

5. Guru Nanak himself refers to this Divine Assignment with deep gratitude:

"I, an unemployed lowly minstrel, was assigned a truly rewarding task."<sup>2</sup>

6. It is proposed, in this paper, to examine briefly, three questions. (1) The origin and growth of the institution of Civil Service in the organized Societies of the World. (2) The origin and genealogy, of the current superior Civil Service in India and (3) Relevance of certain teachings of Guru Nanak to the Civil servant in general.

<sup>1</sup>*Puratan Janamsakhi*, Punjab Govt. Lahore, 1912. pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup>*hau dhāḍi vekār kārē lāiā.*

7. Ancient Greece and mediaeval Europe created many important traditions of representative Government as did Confucian China much of which traditions has entered the common heritage of personal administration in the modern State.

8. In ancient India the problem of recruitment and control of Civil Service received early and sustained attention as is apparent from the pointed injunctions laid in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. In Chapter IX, Section 27, Kautilya ordains merit as the best basis of recruitment to all cadres of responsible Civil Servants and directs a constant supervision as the only guarantee of their continued efficiency. Kautilya seems to have been well aware of the hazards of in-group rivalry that is likely to generate in Civil Service cadres and he was thoroughly opposed to formations of Service Unions of Civil Servants. He says:

"Those who are possessed of ministerial qualifications shall, in accordance with their individual capacity, be appointed as Superintendents of Government Departments. While engaged in work, they shall be kept under constant supervision and daily examination, for, men are naturally fickle-minded, and, like horses at work, exhibit constant change in their temper..Without dissensions, personal rivalries and without any concord among themselves they shall carry on their work as ordered."<sup>3</sup>

9. It was in ancient China, however, that a close and sustained attention was first paid to the problem of Civil Services necessary for

<sup>3</sup>*amātyasampadopetāḥ sarvādhyakshāḥ shaktitah karamasu niyojyāḥ. 1. karamasucaishām nityam parikshām kāryet. 2. cittāninityatvānamanushyanām. 3. ashavadharmāṇohi manushya niyuktatah karamasu vikurvate. 4. ....te yathāsamdeshamāsamhita avigrahitāḥ kurguh. 6.*

running a State efficiently and it was there that techniques for recruitment, promotion, and supervision of Government employees on the basis of merit were diligently examined and developed. As far back as 165 B.C., it is on record that, the system of competitive written examinations for appointment to higher Civil Services were adopted. Emperor Hsiao Wen set questions for written answers by the men recommended for high Offices.<sup>4</sup>

10. During the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) contributions to Civil Service techniques of outstanding value were made that have influenced the modern Civil Service throughout the World. Selection by merit, ensuring stability of career, freedom from interference by usurpers of power, whom some might be tempted to call public representatives and politicians of today, gave a measure of maturity and stability to Civil Services that rendered the Sung Dynasty uniquely long lived in Chinese history. The most peculiar feature of the Sung Civil Services system was what might be described as, the 'Sponsorship System' that has remained almost unique amongst the World political institutions. The principle of this Sponsorship System, *pao jen* in Chinese, consisted in making not only initial appointments but granting special promotions on the recommendations of a permanent superior officer, who, thereafter, was legally answerable for the quality and the acts of his protegee and this technique became the regular practice in Chinese personnel administration. This technique, though not formally adopted as the regular principle of recruitment, filtered to modern times as is evident from the appointments which used to be made by the Secretary of State for India to the Indian Agricultural

Service till almost the twenties of the Twentieth Century. The Secretary of State used to make initial appointments to the Indian Agricultural Service directly and without any reference to merit formally and impersonally ascertained in any regular or competitive test. Fortunately for him, the Secretary of State for India did not accept the concomitant of this technique, namely, legal responsibility for the failures and misdeeds of officers thus appointed by him. This system of Sponsorship for recruitment of higher Civil Services is illustrated by the first available Imperial Proclamation of the Chinese Emperor Chien Lung made in the 3rd Regnal Year (962 A.D.) second month, second day, which runs as follows:

"Han Lin academicians and civil court officials who have formerly served as civil aiders or (lesser) officials in the prefectures or sub-prefectures, shall each recommend one man suitable to be a civil aide, sub-prefect or executive inspector. If the sponsor have near relatives (who are suitable) selection may also be made from among them. Then set forth (all pertinent facts) in a form of recommendation. On the day of appointment (of a recommended man) further set forth the name and surname of the sponsor. If in office (the recommended man) should prove greedy and sullied, unfair, apprehensive and soft, inert, neglectful of duties (or), errant in his legal verdicts and evasive, then weighing the gravity of the case implicate (the sponsor) in the offence."

11. This background acquires particular interest for us because it was on the principle of sponsorship that Jairam, the brother-in-law of Nanak, already a responsible Civil Servant in the Government of the Lodhi Prince at Sultanpur, had secured the appointment of the Chief Store Keeper for Nanak and when accusations were made against Nanak of

<sup>4</sup>Dubs, H. Homer. *A Critical Translation with Annotations of The History of the Former Han Dynasty by Pan Ku*. 2 Vols. Baltimore (1938-44) I. p. 259.

gross misconduct, Jairam was held accountable, till Nanak was absolved of the accusations.

12. In Europe, the development of considered, impersonal and standardized procedures for handling administrative personnel came relatively late. Even imperial Rome with its vast territories and its preoccupation with administrative methods seems to have recruited and promoted officials on the basis of custom and personal judgement of superiors.<sup>5</sup>

13. The bureaucracies of Royal administrations of mediaeval Europe were recruited largely through a hereditary prerogative, royal favour or court nepotism.<sup>6</sup>

14. The direct influence of Chinese example on the development of British Civil Service Examination in the 19th century through the practices and procedures of Indian Civil Service is now well conceded.<sup>7</sup>

15. This brings us directly to the Indianization of the Indian Civil Service which latter is the direct matrix and the predecessor of the Indian Administrative Service on whose shoulders now devolve the vast responsibilities of handling the complex administrative problems of a new free India.

16. The British East India Company, till the battle of Pallasey in 1757, was in the position of a mere trader in India and its officials were called, 'Factors' and 'Writers' with its administrative authority confined to Company's factories in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The

only Indians in its service were interpreters and brokers. In 1752 when the British East India Company secured administrative powers and thus became the Hon'ble John Company, it continued using the Civil Service personnel in the employment of the Nabob of Bengal, its predecessor. The Mughal policy was to employ Indians of all races and religions in senior positions to checkmate the possibility of emergence of powerful classes of hereditary officials till Aurangzib initiated the policy of mussalmanizing the supervisory Revenue field Services, including and above the post of Kanungo. By and large, however, Rajputs and Muslims were both found in administrative and military posts of the Mughal Administration, though Muslims predominated in the Judicial and Hindus in the Revenue Departments. In 1793, Governor General Cornwallis replaced all senior officials by Europeans and henceforward under the Charter Act of 1793 all posts of over £500/- per annum were reserved for the Company's new "covenanted" Services.

17. The exclusion of Indians from the senior positions of administrative responsibility was, however, strongly criticized by successive British Governors of provinces such as Elphinstone and Malcolm of Bombay and Munro of Madras. Munro wrote in 1817:

"It is from men who either hold or are eligible for public offices that nations take their character: where no such men exist, there can be no energy in any other class of the community. No elevation can be expected from men who in the military line cannot attain to any rank above that of Subedar where they are as much below the ensign as the ensign is below the Commander-in-Chief or who in the Civil line can hope for nothing beyond some petty and revenue office in which they may by corrupt means

<sup>5</sup>Mattingly Harold, *The Imperial Civil Services and Rome*, Cambridge, (1910).

<sup>6</sup>Tout, T. F.: *The English Civil Service in the Fourteenth Century*. Manchester, 1916.

<sup>7</sup>Ssu Yu Teng: "Chinese Influence on the Western Examination System", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1943) VII, 267-312.



make up for their slender salary. Foreign conquerors have treated the natives with violence, but none with such scorn as we."<sup>8</sup>

Malcolm was even more forthright and he asserted:

"We must or we cannot last associate Indians with us."<sup>9</sup>

18. While conducting its twenty-year review for renewal of the Charter of the East India Company, British Parliament, through a select Committee, considered the question of employment of Indians to the higher Civil posts and the Select Committee reported:

"(Indians') admission under European control into the higher offices would have a beneficial effect in correcting the moral obliquities of their general character: would strengthen their attachment to British dominion .... would be a great saving in the expenses of the Indian Government."<sup>10</sup>

19. Out of this background arose the Clause 87 of the East India Charter 1883:

"And be it enacted that no native of the said Territories, nor any natural-born subject of His Majesty, resident therein, by reason only of his Religion, Place of Birth, Descent, Colour or any of them, be disabled from holding any Place, Office or Employment under the said Company."

20. The effects of this Clause 87 of the Charter were felt to be so disconcerting after

a number of years that Lord Curzon, while Viceroy of India, complained personally to the Secretary of State for India that:

"an increasing number of 900 and odd higher posts that were meant for and ought to have been exclusively and specifically reserved for Europeans are being filched away by the Superior wits of the native in the English examinations."<sup>11</sup>

21. It was not till 1924 when on the proposal of the Lee Commission it was agreed that fifty per cent of the posts of the Indian Civil Service should be Indianized over the next fifteen years.

22. When in 1942 your speaker of this evening was on a private visit at Wardha, he informed Mahatma Gandhi in reply to his query that by 1960 the Indians might predominate over the Europeans in the Indian Civil Service, to which Mahatma Gandhi sententiously remarked, "1960 *kis ne dekhā hai!*"

23. When in 1947 the British left India only a sprinkling of Europeans remained as part of the Indian Civil Service and the next year or two from today will see the last of the I.C.S. men vanish from the stage which is now occupied by the cadre represented by the distinguished audience this evening.

24. Now, India has squarely entered the age of political power in its own right and is struggling to carve out a legitimate place for herself in the comity of Nations. Everywhere, people are turning to Government to achieve purposes that formerly were left to private institutions or private enterprises. Great Britain has become a Welfare Society. U.S.A. has its

<sup>8</sup>Gleig, G. R. *Life of Sir T. Munro*, London, (1831), Vol. II-85.

<sup>9</sup>Edward, E. *History of India*, London (1963) p. 259.

<sup>10</sup>Max Muller: *India, What can It Teach Us?*, London, (1883), p.42.

<sup>11</sup>Phillips, C.H. *Select Documents on History of India and Pakistan*, London, (1962), Vol. V-564.

New Deal. India is reaching out, through 'mixed economy' to the apocalypse or the Utopia styled, the 'Socialist Pattern of Society'. Russia is both totalitarian and dictatorial and thus bureaucracy has become an unavoidable consequence, or shall we say necessary evil of modern governments. The things that the Governments seek to accomplish these days cannot be achieved merely through enactments of statutes and framing of regulations unless great number of men and women are employed to put the Government policy into practice. Men and women brought into work together in large organizations constitute bureaucracy such as you, ladies and gentlemen are.

25. The recruitment, the promotion, the control and incentivization of such a complicated organization as a modern bureaucracy naturally raise complicated problems that requires constant review and revision, but there is an ethos and a moral bed-rock on which such an organization must rest if it has to prove efficient and enduring in relation to the purposes it is designed to achieve and to remain invulnerable to shocks implicit in the vagaries and vicissitudes of politics, particularly democratic politics, for, mere coercive disciplinary measures, experience shows, do not altogether succeed. The Egyptian officials were slaves of the Pharaoh and the Roman latifundia-owners liked to commission slaves with management of their money matters because of the torture they could lawfully inflict on them in case of inefficiency or errancy. In China it has been sought, and perhaps in some form or other the principle is still operative, to place reliance on the prodigal use of the bamboo-stick as a disciplinary measure from which our own political concept of, *dandā*, seems to have been directly borrowed. Our ancient *Manavadharamasastra* (VII-18) informs us that it is "the bamboo stick that sustains human rectitude": *dando dharamāha*.

The practical experience extending over centuries in various countries and climes, in relation to organization and control of administrative personnel teaches us that the relative optimum for the success and maintenance of bureaucratic efficiency are 'provided by a secured money salary, fair chances of promotion in career that is broad-based on the official's sense of honour, development of prestige-sentiments and fear of God or development of a matured moral conscience.

As our experience extends over centuries in various and varied periods and forms of governmental organisations and social complexities, the words of the Deuteronomist acquire more and more literal and inescapable force in relation to the calling and vocation of a Civil Servant in particular and an individual in general: "See, I have set before you, this day, life and good, and death and evil." (Deuteronomy; 30:15.). This is precisely the point which Guru Nanak himself made out, during his sojourn to Mecca, as Bhai Gurdas (1561-1637) tells us:

"Then the leaders of Religion and the church-dignitaries engaged Nanak in discussion over the First Principles.

And they pointedly asked him to open the Book that he carried (knowing it was not a *Korān*) and answer: 'Whether the Hindu Way of Life or the Muslim Way of Life is superior.'

And Nanak replied, 'O, pilgrims, neither one nor the other, but the good deed alone without which nothing avails.' <sup>12</sup>

26. It is here when we are considering and

<sup>12</sup>*ākhan gal imān dī kājī mullā katṭhe hoī, pucchan Khohl kitāb nū hindū vadā ki mussalmanoī, bābe kahīā hājio subh amlān bāhjon doven roī.*

dealing with the very foundations of the operative health of higher Civil Services that Guru Nanak's teachings acquire pertinence and poignant relevance, not only because he was a World Teacher of universal moral value but also because his professional background was essentially that of a Civil Servant. True that after he settled down in his later life, as a householder, he engaged in agricultural farming for his livelihood but at that time he had already acquired the status of a Prophet who received his Light direct from "God beyond Whom there is no God."<sup>13</sup> But before the age of 27 when he was still a human individual and a secular man, he was a regular Civil Servant and it is only to be expected that in his utterances as a Prophet there must be implicit his background personal experiences of a Civil Servant.

27. When we study his Revelations, and the utterances of his successor Guru Angad, who more often than not, almost literally echoes Guru Nanak, from this point of view, we are enabled to gather a few principles of such universal import that clearly apply to the moral foundations on which an efficient and enduring Civil Service must be based, in all times and particularly under the complicated conditions such as prevail in India and World today, when the Civil Service has acquired increasingly large measures of power entailing an urgent call for developing a fully responsible conscience.

(i) In one of his utterances, the Guru says:

"Those who enter (public) service must remember that their paramount duty is to carry out orders in letter and spirit both. This alone will give him honour,

recognition rewarding satisfaction as well as felicity of ample promotions."<sup>14</sup>

The principle is of fundamental importance to administrative personnel of a State in all times and under all circumstances. A Civil Servant who operates with mental reservations of absence of rectitude in the due performance of his duties and implementation of the orders duly conveyed, is something less than a Civil Servant and not a complete and whole Civil Servant.

(ii) At another place the Guru has said that "an employee who not only proposes and advises but also criticizes and opposes vitiates his calling basically."<sup>15</sup>

This again is a principle of universal import and of inestimable value for the guidance of a Civil Servant, under all circumstances, throughout his active career. A Civil Servant in the highest position has the privilege of proposing and the prerogative of advising, but when a competent decision has been taken he is debarred from criticizing or opposing it or from retaining mental reservations, while executing it. A decision competently taken after due consideration is not to be cavilled at for purposes of evasion or defection by a Civil Servant. A Civil Servant who bears this principle in mind in the performance of his duties need normally never come to harm at the hands of a politician or a higher authority. Guru Nanak also lays stress on whole-hearted performance of one's duty which, he asserts, is a stage towards spiritual progress that leads to the *summum bonum*.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>*cākar lagai cākri je callai khasmai bhāi  
hurmat tīs nū agālī oh vajuh bī dūnā khāi.*

<sup>15</sup>*salām jawāb doven karai mudhahu ghutthā jāi.*

<sup>16</sup>*vic duniyā sev kamāiai tān dargeh bāisan pāiaih.*

<sup>13</sup>*aprampar pābrahm parmesar Nānak gur miliā soī jīo.*

(iii) But Guru Nanak is careful to point out that blind and slavish execution of any order, when it is demonstrably immoral and clearly opposed to public interest, is not to be done just because it is an order. All spheres of the duty of a Public Servant are to be governed by ultimate moral requirements so that the German military axiom, *Befehl ist Befehl*, i.e. "Orders are Orders", does not become a justification for crimes against man and God. It will be recalled that *Befehl ist Befehl* was the basic defence adopted by the accused persons at the international trials held in Nuremberg.

(iv) Guru Nanak is fundamentally opposed to extraction of bribes or pecuniary advantages from the public by a Public Servant! He declares that:

"What is not legitimately due is religiously forbidden, no matter to what religion one belongs. Because, it is not by formal assertion of faith that a man gains admittance to Paradise of God's Grace but only through the moral excellence of his deeds."<sup>17</sup>

(v) Guru Nanak pointedly refers to decisions by persons in authority *mala fides* made, though formally correct, a device of tyranny practised by Public Servants in all ages. The Guru says:

"Sitting in the seat of a Judge and adopting forms and procedures of a man engaged in the dispensation of true justice in fear of God still might take decisions perverse and *mala fides* and yet justify them with reference to the letter of the law and the precedent cases."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>*hak barāiā Nānakā us sūar us gāi galli bhist na jāie chhūte sacu kamāi.*

<sup>18</sup>*kāji hoike bahenīāi, tasbī phere kare khudāi, vaḍḍhī lai ke hak gavāi, je ko pucche tā paḍhī sūnāi.*

28. These are only some of utterances and revelations of Guru Nanak that are of particular importance and pertinence to the Civil Servants of today in the modern World. Guru Nanak unambiguously persuades men not to go in pursuits of lucre and wealth but to live a life of honesty and dedication to ends higher than himself and this advice is of utmost importance to those also who would go in for a Civil Service career. Guru Nanak further squarely condemns all forms of tyranny and injustice perpetrated by those in State authority in a hymn opening with:

"The times are the knife and Government officials are the butchers."<sup>19</sup>

is the strongest possible condemnation of State tyranny in all forms, whether ancient or modern.

29. Guru Nanak, therefore, is not only relevant to the modern man in his fundamental problems of existence, in relation to questions that arise out of the nature of man and the world and the ultimate goal of man, but is also relevant for those whose main preoccupation is skill in public affairs. Guru Angad, Nanak the Second truly said of Guru Nanak that "He showed us the right path here in this World and he led us into the divine Spheres of Truth. What further guidance do they require who have turned their faces towards Guru Nanak as their Guru and Teacher!"<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>*kaḷ kātī rāje kāsāi.*

<sup>20</sup>*dikhiā ākh bujhāiā sifati saceu sameo, tin kau kiā upadesiāi jini guru Nānak deo.*